

Superintendents Supporting Culturally Responsive School Leadership: Success Factors in the United States and Implications for Superintendents in Germany

Keywords:

Culturally Responsive School Leadership, Superintendents, Policy Borrowing, Leadership, Equity

Research Overview

To dismantle marginalization, culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and leadership (Khalifa, 2022) aligning school practices with students' experiences (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020) are essential. Such leadership requires support from superintendents who act as *change agents*, set objectives, and emphasize culturally responsive practices (Maxwell et al., 2013; Skrla et al., 2011).

Purpose of Study

How superintendents can support school improvement is a key challenge for German school improvement research and practice. However, little is known about how the German equivalent of superintendents, *Schulaufsichtsbeamt:innen* (SAB), support culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), mainly due to an overall scarcity of research in this area. Only recently, post-reforms shifting SAB from oversight to advisory roles, has systematic research emerged (Klein & Bremm, 2020).

Consequently, there is a need for effective approaches to support SAB in developing CRSL competencies. Since their leadership role is new and systematic training remains limited, identifying standards for CRSL within German SAB practice is unlikely to succeed.

This study aims to use a policy borrowing approach to identify the conditions necessary for supporting CRSL and the competencies required of SAB. Drawing on established models and documented examples of good practice, we conduct this analysis in the U.S. We address two central research questions: (1) Which standards and conditions characterize effective superintendent support for CRSL in U.S. districts? (2) How can these standards be applied to the training and leadership practices of German SAB?

This paper outlines the conditions and competencies that were identified in an interview study with U.S. experts. It focuses on superintendents' support practices for CRSL, their relationships with principals, and relevant political and administrative circumstances as well as characteristics of districts and district administrations.

Research Methods

The study adopts a policy borrowing approach. First, we systematically identify support practices as potential models within the U.S. context. Then, we assess the transferability of these practices to the German context. Next, we develop strategies to adapt these practices for superintendent professional development. Finally, our goal is to disseminate these strategies by developing and piloting a prototype training program in Germany (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

First, we conducted twelve guided expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2009) with three stakeholder groups from seven U.S. school districts:

- (a) superintendents;
- (b) experts in their training;
- (c) principals.

We selected interview partners via purposive sampling based on their demonstrated good practice or professional CRSL engagement.

In spring 2025, we conducted remote guided interviews (average length: 64 minutes). The protocol covered:

- stakeholders' CRSL perceptions in districts;
- principals' support needs in diverse contexts;
- interviewees' role in fostering CRSL;
- required superintendent competencies/preparation.

We audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim and analyzed them using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2016). We used a coding system that was developed both inductively and deductively, based on literature about CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2016) and related concepts such as transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Through careful reading of the transcripts, we developed inductive codes iteratively to identify context-specific practices and interpretations (Kuckartz, 2016). To enhance reliability, at least two researchers coded each interview passage, and we discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached.

Next, we presented our findings to a workshop of experts, including researchers and practitioners specializing in school administration and equity. We discussed ways to adapt the findings to the German context. Finally, we held additional conversations with experts from the German states in which the training program will be piloted in order to be sensitive to regional conditions.

Results and Discussion

The analysis indicates that successful CRSL was tied to superintendents' culturally responsive leadership and support for principals. They created relationship-oriented, reflective, and collaborative environments where principals could critically examine deficit-oriented assumptions, engage with communities, and experiment with culturally responsive practices. The results illustrated three standards: (1) developing and sustaining a coherent equity vision at district level; (2) ensuring visible, accessible presence in schools, and (3) establishing spaces for ongoing professional learning and mutual accountability related to CRSL (see also Aguayo et al., 2023).

In Germany, the analysis highlights both transfer opportunities and structural barriers. While U.S. superintendents leverage formal authority and accountability systems, German SAB traditionally emphasize organizational and legal oversight (Klein & Bremm, 2020). Nevertheless, we contend that the identified standards are relevant design influences for training programs in the Germany: SAB can support CRSL by explicitly focusing their advisory work on educational equity, using existing communication structures for reflective dialogue with and for principals, and encouraging principals to participate in professional development aimed at CRSL practices. These efforts do not require formal changes to legal responsibilities, but rather a cultural and professional reorientation of SAB's roles as *change agents* (Skrla et al., 2011).

In response to this context, the prototype training program will provide capacity-building activities to strengthen the SAB's ability to balance administrative duties with equity-oriented leadership.

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